CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION OF 1876

Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

The Main Exhibition Building. Trains, as in foreground, carried visitors about the grounds.

PHILADELPHIA was astir with the excitement of anticipation as a whole nation, well prepared by months of publicity, waited. The day was May 10, 1876, and in a few hours the President of the United States and the Emperor of Brazil would open in Fairmount Park the great International Exhibition to celebrate the centennial year of American independence.

The day had begun with the ringing of the city's bells. Then the rain had stopped, though the sky remained leaden. With nothing to deter them now and with months of waiting at an end, thousands streamed to the park, 100,000 to wait, as the sun appeared, for the nine o'clock opening of the Exhibition gates. As they waited they could see, close by, the vast Main Exhibition Building. Beyond were the towers and expanse of Machinery Hall, the Gothic "barns" of Agricultural Hall, the arabesque architectural intricacies of Horticultural Hall, the art galleries of Memorial Hall, and twenty-four state and many other buildings—236 acres of exhibits and exhibition grounds.

In choosing a site for the celebration, the United State Congress had most appropriately selected the city where American independence was proclaimed and where the Constitution, which made a nation of thirteen colonies, was written. Philadelphia was stretching at the seams now to accommodate the visitors which history had brought it. More than eight million admissions, from this country and abroad—the population of the United States was forty million—were counted at the fair during the six months it was open, from May 10 through November 10. It was perhaps the greatest extravaganza ever staged in the State of Pennsylvania.

The idea of an international exhibition was not original with those who planned the celebration, as such gatherings can be traced at least to the trade

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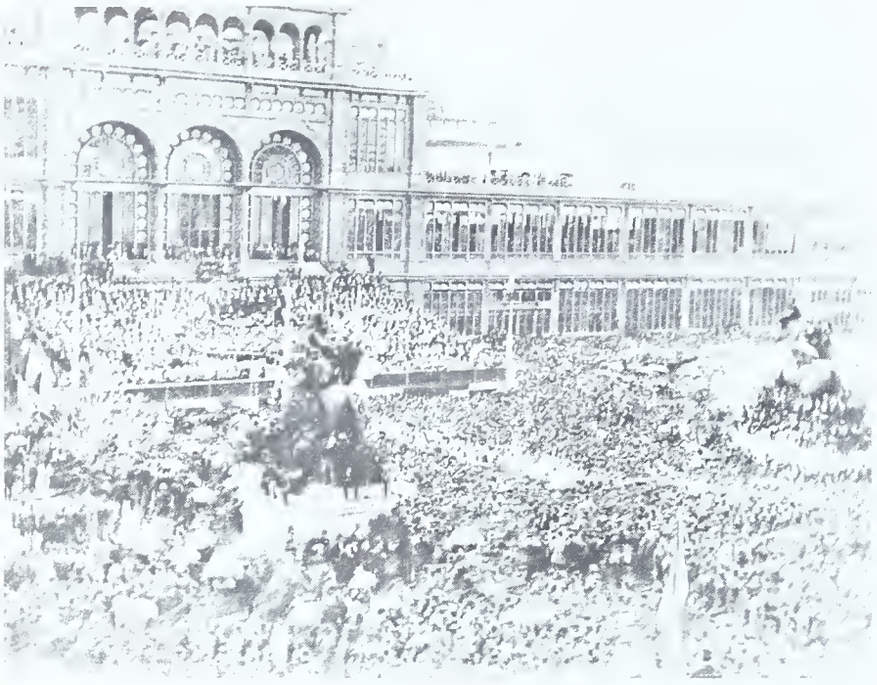


Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

President Grant and Emperor Dom Pedro looked out upon this throng from the front of Memorial Hall, out of the picture to the right, at opening day ceremonies. The 1,000 voice choir is massed in the stand before the north entrance of the Main Exhibition Building.

fairs of the Middle Ages. Most likely, however, the advocates of the Exhibition had in mind the fairs which had been held since the middle of the nineteenth century, especially the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, inspired by Prince Albert. Yet the notion of combining a world's fair with a national celebration of independence was unprecedented, and the idea was successfully transformed into the first such event held in the United States.

The first to suggest an international exhibition in Philadelphia for the anniversary seems to have been a college professor in the Midwest. His idea was readily embraced by several civic-minded citizens and the city fathers of Pennsylvania's largest city. The General Assembly of the Commonwealth and the Franklin Institute joined with the city government in petitioning the federal government, and in 1871 the United States Centennial Commission was created by act of the Congress. This commission was charged with planning "an International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the Soil and Mine." Members of the body were appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant following nomination by the governors of the states and territories. Joseph R. Hawley, of Connecticut, was named the president. Representing Pennsylvania was Daniel J. Morrell, of Johnstown, a U. S. representative who had introduced into the Congress the act that created the commission. Pennsylvania's alternate was the railroad magnate Asa Packer.

Not only were there historical reasons for holding America's celebration in the city of Philadelphia, there were practical advantages as well. Fairmount, one of the oldest and largest municipal parks in the country, was an ideal spot for such a celebration. In 1873 some 450 acres of the pastoral grounds of Fairmount Park were set aside for the Centennial Exhibition. At the same time a proclamation by President Grant announced the Exhibition to the world; and in the summer of 1874 the Chief Executive, at the direction of the Congress, invited the governments of foreign nations to participate.

The exhibition opened as scheduled on May 10, 1876, to a vast throng of visitors. Philadelphia was resplendently decked out for fairgoers with bunting and with the flags of participating nations. Trains of out-of-town visitors disgorged at fairground stations. A host of dignitaries attended also, led by President and Mrs. Grant, Emporer Dom Pedro II of Brazil and his Empress, and the governors of Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. Dom Pedro, whose unassuming manner, intense curiosity, and admiration for the United States had made him a national celebrity, was the favorite of the crowds. During the opening ceremonies Richard Wagner's "Centennial Grand March," John Greenleaf Whittier's "Centennial Hymn," and Sidney Lanier's "Centennial Cantata" were played and sung. At 12 noon, after an address by the President, the Centennial Exhibition was opened amid a resounding artillery salute of 100 guns. Then the official party and the many notables visited the pavilions.

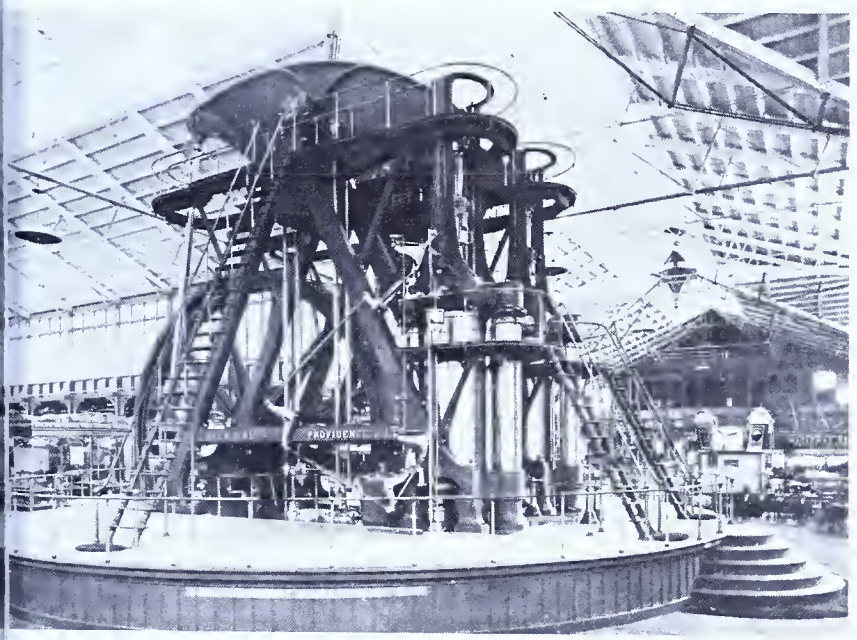
The Centennial Commission provided for all exhibits to be classified into seven departments, mining and metallurgy, manufactures, education and science, machinery, agriculture, art, and horticulture. These departments were housed in the five major buildings of the Exhibition. The Main Exhibition Building contained the exhibits relating to manufactures, mining and metallurgy, and science and education, while each of the other four departments had its own building.

The largest building at the fair was the Main Exhibition Building, which covered over twenty-one

acres and was 464 feet in width and 1,880 feet in length. This enormous structure of wood, glass, and iron held an amazing number of exhibits from thirty nations. A seemingly endless variety of items was put on display, soaps, furniture, books, tools, medicines, religious tracts, military and naval armaments, and thousands of others. Some interesting new inventions were also shown, among them the electric light, the typewriter, the telephone, and an automatic baby feeder.

Machinery Hall was the second largest of the buildings, covering fourteen acres and containing almost every conceivable type of machine. On display were machines for working metal, stone, and wood, for sewing, spinning, weaving, printing, mining, farming, traveling, and processing foodstuffs. Power was supplied by the forty-foot-high steam engine designed by George H. Corliss, inventor and manufacturer. The giant Corliss engine could be run by one man and was the talk of the Exhibition. The third major building was Agricultural Hall.

The other major structures were Memorial Hall and Horticultural Hall. Memorial Hall was designed as a permanent museum of art, and was built by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia. On display was Peter Rothermel's huge thirty-two by sixteen and three-quarter-foot painting of the Battle of Gettysburg, which can now be seen in the William Penn Memorial Museum in Harrisburg. Memorial Hall was converted in the 1960's to a recreation center and headquarters for the Fairmount Park Commission. Philadelphia erected the ornament of the fair, Horticultural Hall. A Moorish-style palace of glass, iron, and colored brick, this exotic edifice, filled with trees and shrubs and flowers, was the most striking of the nearly 200 buildings erected. One of the most interesting examples of the Moorish style in the United States, and intended to be permanent, it was razed after receiving damage from high winds in the early 1950's.



Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

The Corliss Engine in Machinery Hall.

Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania State Building.

In addition to the five major buildings and the host of lesser structures, there were other important buildings. Among them were the U. S. Government Building and the Women's Pavilion. The Women's Pavilion, erected by the Women's Centennial Committee led by Mrs. Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, energetic great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, was an innovation for an exposition, the first large-scale attempt to exhibit the products of feminine industry and taste. It showed the relative emancipation of the women of the United States, while it bombarded visitors with feminist and women's rights propaganda in its weekly newspaper, *The New Century for Woman.*

Among the smaller buildings were the pavilions of various nations, although the principal exhibits of the foreign countries were in the Main Exhibition Building. Buildings were erected by Sweden, Chile, Turkey, Great Britain, Spain, the recently created German Empire, Brazil, France, and Portugal. Japan, closed to the western world before 1854, erected two, a dwelling and a bazaar, for its very popular exhibit.

Almost two-thirds of the states of the Union built pavilions, which contained offices, reception rooms, and in a few cases exhibits. Elaborately Victorian in design, they were among the most picturesque structures at the fair. Pennsylvania, as the host state, had two, one of whch was devoted exclusively to education in the Commonwealth. Special "state days" always drew large numbers of visitors, and frequently the governors attended. Pennsylvania Day, on September 28, in fact drew 274,919 persons —visitors and exhibitors—at the fair, the largest attendance of any single day.

Naturally there was plenty of food available for the fairgoers, who had their choice of French, Jewish, Turkish, Viennese, and German restaurants, as well as numerous American establishments. Among the latter was the South Restaurant, which specialized in the succulent foods served below the Potomac. There was general complaint, however, about the prices. An English visitor wrote to his brother that "at first the eating places charged so shamefully that they killed the business at the start." There were also "pop-corn buildings" and "soda water stands" and other dispensers of light refreshments. There was, however, no midway crowded with shooting galleries, haunted swings, or giant see-saws to detract from the exhibits. The fairground was surrounded by a nine-foot-high board fence, and just outside it, in the boom town where the huge Globe Hotel and other inns had been built, one could find livelier entertainment.

On November 10, 1876, President Grant returned to Fairmount Park to close the great fair. The ceremonies were most impresive and were well attended by governing officials from all of the United States. Open for 159 days, but never on Sundays, the Exhibition counted 8,004,325 paid admissions, and probably attracted a total of about 8.200,000 admissions. Nearly fifty countries of the world were represented by exhibitors, the number reaching 30.864 (almost three-fourths of them foreign). The average total exhibitor staff was 10,000 persons.

Fairmount Park was now to be cleared, to become once against the athletic, cultural, and recreational club of the City of Brotherly Love. The exhibits were crated and most of the structures dis-

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The torch hand of the Statue of Liberty. At left in the background is the Women's Pavilion, and in the distance, center, Agricultural Hall.

assembled. The splendid processions by Knights Templar and the Grand Army of the Republic and the Knights of Pythias were past. Switzerland's Day, Odd Fellow's Day, Canada's Day, and Woman's Day (held on election day since women could not vote) were history. The hand bearing the torch of the Statue of Liberty, a centennial gift to this country from France, was on its way to New York harbor.

Besides Memorial Hall, a few other structures remain intact still, to help tell the story of this great showcase of Victorianism. Several of the picturesque state buildings were moved to South Jersey resorts and elsewhere. The Ohio Building remains in Fairmount Park, as does the magnificent and ornate Catholic Total Abstinence Fountain, with its statues of Revolutionary War figures.

The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia was a coming-out party for the United States of America. For the first time, her industrial progress was put on display for the world to see. The Exhibition also gave Americans a chance to reflect on the tremendous growth and development in all aspects of life that had been made in the United States during the first century of independence. Because of its emphasis on national progress, the fair helped heal the wounds left by the troubles of the preceding decades. The Centennial Exhibition was a successful birthday party given by a proud people.

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